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All in the family home: The biological children of parents who foster

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ALL IN THE FAMILY HOME:

THE BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN

OF PARENTS WHO FOSTER

BY:

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Abstract

Foster families are intended to provide children at risk with a secure environment. But how secure is this environment for the biological children of the foster family? While foster parents may feel drained by the needs of the foster children in their homes, the biological children may feel neglected by their parents. How do these children respond to -and perceive- the reality of foster children in their home?

To address these questions, nine children were interviewed individually. Five of these were children still living at home, four were adult children reflecting back on their experiences growing up. The results from these interviews were presented to the parents in two separate focus groups.

The biological children of foster parents described their perceptions of the relationships between biological and foster members within their homes. Their conceptualizations are depicted and described here as 'open boundary' families, 'solid nucleus' families, and 'partially integrated' families. Parents reflected on these categories and suggested strengths and challenges for each category. Children and parents also identified key elements which contributed to their family's ability to adjust to the needs of both the foster and biological children in appropriate ways.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Foster families are intended to provide children at risk with a secure environment. But how secure is this environment for the biological children of that foster family? While foster parents may feel drained by the needs of the foster children in their homes, the biological children may feel neglected by their parents. How do families function -and perceive themselves- when a foster child is introduced?

When an attempt was made to delineate what conclusions were in the literature on this subject, I was surprised to find very little relevant information. While there was a scarcity of information in journals and other published writing, many people in the child welfare field demonstrated considerable interest in this topic. Inspired by the enthusiasm of those involved in fostering and by the lack of existing relevant research, the present exploratory study was undertaken in an attempt to understand the experiences of the biological children of families who foster.

Although there are copious amounts of information on fostering which focus on the foster parents and the foster children, there is a gap in the literature regarding the biological children of foster parents. Parents are naturally concerned for the welfare of their biological children, but may feel incompetent as foster parents if their own children experience difficulty. Parents have suggested that the "bottom line" for them was the welfare of their biological children. Therefore, if the entire family, and particularly the biological children, are not supported during the experiences of fostering, the foster placement may fail.

Despite the obvious importance the biological child has in relation to the foster

family's experience as a whole, their experiences are not incorporated into the present discussion around fostering. The purpose of this qualitative and exploratory approach to the realities of the biological children is to include their perspective in the fostering dialogue and to create an awareness of the dynamics within the family which are of importance to the parents, and also to the child welfare agency which wishes to support the efforts of the foster parents.

Previous research has focused solely on either the parents or the children. Where the children have been approached for their responses, their answers were open to parental scrutiny which may have biased their answers to ensure parental approval. Part (1993) notes that answers given by children and parents were not always similar, suggesting the importance of allowing both children and parents to voice their opinions independently of the other party.

The research presented here includes the subjective and individual reflections of the biological children as well as the communal and critical response of the foster parents. Children were interviewed separately from parents and therefore should not have felt the necessity to answer as their parents would desire. Focus groups granted the parents an opportunity to contribute their experiences independently of their children as well.

Five children and four adults who had experience growing up in their biological family with foster siblings were interviewed individually. These participants described their personal experiences as well as their perceptions of the relationships between the biological and foster members within their homes. Alternate

conceptualizations of the organization of their families and the relationships between members were identified. Biological children who felt the need to include the foster siblings in their concept of family described a perspective labelled here as 'Open Boundary'. An alternate approach portrayed by participants maintained a clear and static distinction between the biological family and the foster children living with this family. This familial framework is entitled 'Solid Nucleus'. Finally, a contingency model was described by individuals who revealed a distinction between foster and biological members but also incorporated a select few into their concept of family. This model is represented here as 'Selective Integration'. Parents who participated in focus groups reflected on these categories and suggested strengths and challenges for each category. Children and parents also identified key elements which determined their family's ability to adjust to the needs of both the foster and biological children in appropriate ways.

Although parents often assumed that the experiences and expectations that their biological children had would resemble their own (perhaps assuming that the entire family would share a similar reaction), this study suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Even between members of the same family, different representations were presented regarding the organization of relationships in that family. Children and parents described feeling pressure to consider their family and their relationships within that family differently than they did, resulting at times in feelings of guilt and added stress.

Researcher Values

It is important to note that this research is based on the belief that families are foundational in our society and expected to provide a nurturing environment for children. It is also my belief that a positive and healthy environment in families does not occur automatically, but at times requires a great deal of effort and consideration. While this research focuses solely on the experiences of foster-families, it is not meant to imply that removing children from dysfunctional homes is the only solution. However, as fostering is a reality in Canadian society, it is believed that this research will be relevant to the experiences of families in this society.

Past experience as a child care worker has provided me with an inside look into the experiences of foster families, and more specifically the struggle which foster parents engage in when they are also raising biological children. This experience has heightened my sensitivity to the dynamics regarding the biological children of parents who foster. It is my assumption that these children experience their family differently than their foster siblings and that their experiences and reactions are unique in the life of their family. These experiences impact the other members of their family in a significant manner.

Due to the lack of existing literature on this topic, important variables regarding the welfare of the biological children of foster parents have not been clearly identified. I employed, therefore, a qualitative research process in an exploratory manner to uncover important aspects of family life for the biological children. It is important to note that the small sample size of this research limits the ability to

generalize the conclusions presented. A range of perspectives (i.e. children of various ages and parents) were included in this study which increase the scope of the topic under question but further research is required to ascertain how applicable these results are to the experiences of other families. However, the conceptions articulated here can be useful for sensitizing families and agencies involved in fostering to important issues. It was suggested by participants that the constructs described in this study are important to discuss in order to better equip families and members of the child welfare system to deal with the challenges which families face when they invite foster children into their homes.

Before considering these concepts, we will consider the relevant background literature in the next chapter. As there was a lack in the amount of existing information, three studies are described in some detail. Chapter three presents the methodology of the research. The constructs developed out of the reflections of the participants are discussed in chapters four and five. Implications and the need for further study are described in the final chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND AND RELATED LITERATURE

The family is recognized as an important institution in this society. Ideally, children are born into families who nurture them, create a sense of belonging and identity, and claim responsibility for them. However, the state intervenes when particular families are not able to care adequately for their children. Fostering is a time-honoured solution to help children whose biological families cannot provide the support which is deemed necessary to develop into healthy adults (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1988).

Fostering is based on the assumption that families are a normative and necessary part of growing up. From the perspective of the child welfare agencies, fostering seems to be the next best thing for children who are in dysfunctional families. But what does fostering do to the family who volunteers to raise children who are not biologically connected to the parents? More specifically, how do the birth children of the foster parents fare when they are compelled to open up their home to strangers and share their parents and their home?

The family provides individuals with an important sense of belonging (Kagan & Schlosberg, 1988; Thomlison, 1991). Foster families are different from most nuclear families because they must operate as open systems, whereas nuclear families are usually semi-closed (Eastman, 1979). Because fostering is a paid occupation, the home must be supervised. This necessitates the admittance of a number of unrelated people: the foster children, agency staff, and often the biological parents of the foster children. All of these intrusions into the family home create stress for the foster

parents and their biological children. Of special interest, therefore, is how the original family unit adapts to the new living conditions.

Eastman (1979) warns that too much openness can be detrimental as it leads to a loss of identity and therefore to dissatisfaction and dissolution. She claims that foster families suffer from a lack of role clarity and clearly defined norms. Ambiguity regarding one's place in a family may result from uncertain parameters around what is considered as one's family. "The foster family system cannot identify itself if it cannot define its boundaries" (Eastman, 1979, p. 567). Uncertainty regarding how much to integrate strangers into the intimate system of a family creates stress for the entire family. The foster family may have a difficult time knowing who belongs to it (Eastman, 1979). Certainly, the threat of losing a unique sense of belonging affects the biological children of parents who open their home to fostering.

The lost sense of belonging is a significant issue for all people involved in the child welfare system. Maintaining a sense of security in a family environment may be a precarious feat if certain aspects are ignored. Family problems place children at an increased risk for psychological difficulties, such as conduct disorder (Rae-Grant, Thomas, Offord, & Boyle, 1989). The biological children of foster parents are an obvious concern for their parents and will affect how foster placements fare. Trasler for example, noted that 87% of failed foster placements occurred where foster parents' own children were of the same age and sex (1960, p. 223). Whereas sibling rivalry is a healthy and normal part of family life, foster siblings present a unique situation for the biological children to deal with. The dynamic between biological

children and non-related temporary residents needs to be studied and understood in order to strengthen and support the entire family involved in foster care.

Little has been published regarding the experiences and roles of the biological children of foster parents. Although they may be considered an integral part of the foster family, they are seldom referred to (Part, 1993). For example, the only reference given to the children of foster parents in a practical handbook entitled "Foster Care: A Guide to Practice" was that they "can sometimes be included in discussions" (Part, 1993). The impact on, and the responses of, the biological children were not presented at all in Working with Birth and Foster Parents: Trainer's Manual (University of Tennessee School of Social Work, 1981) nor in The Practical Guide to Foster Family Care (Kaplan & Seitz, 1980). Brown revealed that even in meetings which were intended to give support for foster families the biological children were not discussed (in Part, 1993).

Walsh and Walsh (1990) investigated aspects of The Casey Family Program, an agency involved in child welfare. They concluded that in this program, "positive aspects of the foster family as a family" were one of the greatest indicators for predicting placement success. However, they failed to delineate what this meant in terms of the role which birth children of the parents play in contributing to these "positive aspects". Information and support for foster families has focused on the foster parents and the foster children, but has ignored the birth children of the foster parents.

Some of the literature on fostering has mentioned the role of the parents'

biological children in passing, while a few have given more attention to their unique contributions to the family's experience of fostering. Although Walsh and Walsh (1990) do not specifically refer to the role which these children play, they do present vignettes which demonstrate important dynamics between the birth children and their foster-siblings. For example, the foster parents of "Cary" also had a son of the same age who resented sharing his place in the family with his foster-brother. Cary, on the other hand, felt resentful of the fact that he could not live up to the standard which the birth-child of his foster-parents had demonstrated.

Another example includes the feelings of "Dean's" foster family. Although the foster-siblings of Dean were adults when their parents fostered this teenager, they felt jealous that this young man received more attention from their mother than they had while growing up. They also felt insecure, wondering if somehow they were not "enough" for their mother (p. 34). Other vignettes reveal that birth children were jealous of the time and extra money given the foster children from their parents, the social workers, and the agencies. In one case, this resentment caused the biological child to intentionally harass the foster child. In another case, one of the birth children uncharacteristically misbehaved after a foster sibling was introduced to the family.

Some foster parents claim that their children have gained increased awareness of and sensitivity to other people's needs (Ellis, 1972). Children have also stated that they have matured and gained understanding because of their unique family situation (Part, 1993). Although some children resented having to share their parents (Part, 1993) some parents felt they had developed a closer relationship with their own

children (Ellis, 1972; Walsh & Walsh, 1991). As there is limited existing research on the experiences of the biological children of foster parents, we will look at some of the relevant studies in some depth.

Part (1993)

Part (1993) cites an unpublished study in 1988 by Van Arnim who looked at the effect of fostering on children between eight and twelve years of age. This study concludes that although the birth children gained a great deal (in terms of maturity and awareness), they also paid a price, especially at certain stages of development. The author states that the difficulties which birth children experience may cause a foster placement to fail.

Both positive and negative experiences regarding fostering were presented in Part's (1993) recent Scottish study. The birth children of foster carers were asked to respond to a questionnaire regarding how they felt about being part of a foster family. Seventy-five people with ages varying from three to twenty-four years responded. This study found that 80% of its respondents declared their experiences were positive, 5% did not like their family as a foster family, and 15% were unsure. Although most of the respondents stated that they liked fostering, they acknowledged that it was often difficult and upsetting.

Some of the aspects of fostering which were identified as positive included companionship, looking after babies, and being challenged to help another person. Most of the respondents who identified companionship as a positive aspect of

fostering lived in families which fostered young children.

Some of the worst experiences associated with fostering included dealing with the foster child's difficult behaviour, feeling jealous of the attention which the foster child received, and having to share one's privacy and possessions. Although the replies focused on practical issues, Part (1993) contends that they may have veiled less tangible feelings of resentment and displacement which are not easy to put into words. The children may also have felt pressure to answer positively as they knew that their parents would see their responses. Of the four respondents who reported negative experiences in Part's study, three had lived in families who fostered teenagers. It seems that fostering teenagers places an extra stressor on the family, demanding more of the parents' energy and the birth children's tolerance.

Generally, Part's study identifies strengths and challenges within foster families. Birth children state that they gained a greater understanding of other people's needs and a sense of responsibility from growing up in a foster family. A greater appreciation of their own family was another benefit associated with the fostering experience. Challenges included feelings of displacement and feeling overwhelmed by the problems which the foster siblings brought with them.

Ellis (1972)

Ellis (1972) recorded the results of personal interviews with ten group home parents who had been fostering for an average of three years. These parents suggested that children between the ages of seven and thirteen had the greatest

difficulty adjusting to living with foster siblings. In nine of the homes, the oldest biological child was the one most affected. These parents also noted that dynamics were difficult when the foster children were the same age as their biological children, especially for children between the ages of seven and thirteen.

Ellis states that it is important for parents to realize that emotionally disturbed children may demonstrate a marked difference between their physical age and emotional maturity. This difference will affect the foster parents' expectations for the foster children and their own children. The discrepancy in expectations may not be an easy situation for children to understand, and it may lead to greater resentment if communication between parents and children does not occur.

Parents noted particular areas which created stress in their experience as foster families. Guilt was described as a common feeling among parents. Parents may feel guilty when they treat the biological children differently than the foster children, and also when they respond similarly to both. Most foster parents expected their own children to share their parents and possessions cheerfully, to be unselfish, understanding, helpful, and mature; but they did not make such lofty expectations for the foster children. The birth children may wonder why their parents are harder on them, and may misinterpret this response as a preference for the foster child. Foster parents have also warned that their own children may be pushed aside when pressures are great, creating an insecure environment for their own children if this happens too many times (Ellis, 1972).

A few suggestions have been given to help ease the difficulties which foster

families face in maintaining their intimate identity as a family. Most foster parents stated their desire for the social worker to be involved with all of the children, instead of solely focusing on the foster children. These parents have also suggested that it is erroneous to expect one's own children to adjust without any problems. In fact, they reveal that often during the initial period where a foster child is integrated into the family, their own children may behave in a more disturbed way than the foster child. The parents understood this dilemma as the interaction of the "honeymoon period" for the new-comer and the adjustment of their own child (p. 95). Understanding dynamics in relationships and changes in behaviour is important in helping the family adjust to new living situations.

Many families in Ellis' study stated that they had started out intending to be "one big happy family" and found that this approach did not work (p. 95). The foster children knew that their foster parents were not their real parents, and the foster parents felt that it was important for their own children to feel special and feel that they belonged to them. The parents claimed that unless this distinction was made, there was confusion in the minds of all the children and the parents' own children "virtually became foster children in their own home" (p. 95).

Other helpful suggestions included preparing the children for the time when the foster children leave. Experiencing the coming and going of foster siblings may affect the child's own sense of security. In some cases, they may experience feelings of guilt about the foster child's departure. It is important to allow the children to express these feelings, as well as other common reactions such as fear, rejection,

resentment, and confusion. Children who express themselves through undesirable behaviour need to feel understood. Parents assert that one must not excuse such behaviour, as this can be interpreted as parental rejection. Rather, they state that discipline is necessary, along with showing more appropriate ways for expression. Finally, both children and adults need opportunities to be alone and to participate in activities outside of the family. Ellis also concluded that parents should plan times to be with their own children.

Twigg (1994)

Another study which highlighted the importance of considering the biological children, referred to these children as "the unknown soldiers" of foster care (Twigg, 1994). Eight families participated in this study. The biological children revealed that they had felt a sense of loss, particularly around their parents' time and attention, family closeness, and their place in the family. An inability to voice personal pain was also identified in Twigg's study. Participants uncovered their frustrations at feeling shoved aside and their lack of emotional connectedness to family members. Children also stated that they regarded the foster children as a "threat to their position" in the family (p. 308). Twigg suggests that foster care placements are more likely to succeed "if there is an age gap of at least three years" (p. 309).

The results of this study reveal that although the foster care system expects the biological children to adapt without any problems, that is not always the case. Furthermore, Twigg suggests that parents feel pressure to have the placements succeed

and therefore deny that their biological children are being adversely affected. Finally, Twigg illuminated the fact that although the foster children may be resented in the home, the anger felt by the biological children was most often directed towards the parents.

Some Key Issues

These studies reveal several key issues. Although Part's study (1993) suggest that many feel positive about fostering (80% in that survey), Twigg's study (1994) highlights several aspects which may prove troublesome for families. Parents have revealed that their own children may act differently depending on their age, how close they are in age to the foster children, and their birth order. Some parents admit to placing different expectations on their own children than on the foster children which would cause them to feel greater pressure from their parents.

The biological children have expressed both positive and negative feelings regarding fostering, but also a need to express their feelings. Children who felt negatively towards fostering redirected that anger towards their parents. Parents need to recognize and allow for the expression of these feelings. Parents also need to identify their own reactions. Guilt is one feeling that has been identified by parents for several reasons. The recognition of aspects which may be difficult and stressful for a foster family would certainly be beneficial for the biological children and their families, as well as the social workers who attempt to provide support for these families.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

As a qualitative study, this research focused on the subjective meanings that the participants attributed to their experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted in order to provide data which reflected the unique reality of each respondent. "If it is our serious purpose to understand the thoughts of a people, the whole analysis of experience must be based on their concepts, not ours" (Boas, 1943; in Patton, 1980, p. 307). A qualitative study using in-depth interviews is an appropriate method for understanding how individuals have experienced sharing their families with other children.

As indicated earlier, very little information is available regarding how families as a whole (including the biological children) adapt to fostering. Due to the lack of literature on this topic, it was appropriate to conduct an exploratory qualitative study to become familiar with the basic issues and concerns. It is not the purpose of this study to imply causality. However, it is expected that this exploratory approach would serve to identify important variables for subsequent descriptive and explanatory research (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Nine interviews were conducted, including the participation of five children still at home and four adult children. Two of the child interviewees were from the same family. Although I did not intend to duplicate families, it was difficult in this case to choose who would participate and who would not. Therefore, both were included. It also enhanced the data by allowing for a comparison of experiences between siblings of the same family.

The methodology was based on a grounded theory approach which inductively constructs theoretical concepts based on the emergent data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). "Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (Patton, 1980, p. 306). Conceptualization and operationalization occur simultaneously with data collection. Such an approach allowed flexibility in the research as data and theory interacted. The constructs presented here emerged from my understanding of the meanings which the participants attributed to their experiences. While reading through the transcripts of the individual interviews, I drew several diagrams to assist myself in depicting the situations which several of the interviewees described. As I continued to read and reflect on the scenarios in the transcripts, it became apparent to me that the participants were describing several alternative conceptions of their families. I continued to depict these pictorially in order to enhance my ability to conceptualize their realities. These diagrams were presented to the parents during the focus groups who subsequently reinforced the centrality of these constructs. Because of the importance which participants placed on their view of family, more attention was focused on this aspect of their experiences.

Site and Sample

While searching for literature on this topic, it came to my attention that while there was not sufficient published material regarding this topic, there existed an

overwhelming interest on the part of parents and fostering agencies. During my efforts to obtain written material on this topic, it was suggested to me that a number of families would be interested in sharing their experiences. Through the efforts of individuals at the Waterloo Family and Children's Services, Mutual Support System in Welland (see Appendix A for a sample letter which was sent to the agencies who assisted in this study), and the snow-balling effect of parents, I interviewed four adult children who reflected on their experiences living with foster siblings and five children who were currently living with foster children in their home.

Data was collected through individual interviews with the two samples of children. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, children of varying ages were included. Although adult children were not asked their age, the approximate average age was twenty-five. The ages of the biological children at home ranged from ages seven to sixteen. Of the child interviewees, three were boys and two were girls. Three female adults and one male adult also participated as interviewees. The number of years of fostering which the children still at home had experienced ranged from three years to seven years, with an average of four years. The adult children had four to fifteen years of experience (average of eight years) of growing up with foster children participated.

Finally, five of the eight sets of parents of the interviewees were able to participate in a focus group. Two separate focus groups were conducted to meet the needs of the parents. The purpose of these groups was to have parents reflect on the general themes which the interviewees highlighted.

Data Collection

Initially, a notice was printed in the foster parents' newsletter through the Waterloo Family and Children's Services. This notice gave a brief description of the topic of the study and parents were encouraged to either notify a member at that agency or to call me directly if they were interested in having their family participate. A member of Mutual Support System was also notified of my research. This agency agreed to participate and then verbally transmitted the information to parents who were involved with Mutual Support. I was also given names and numbers of families recommended by people I had contacted through both of these agencies.

When I was notified of a suitable family or called by a family member, I offered to set up a meeting to introduce myself to the entire family and to explain the purpose of my research while allowing them to meet me. I then followed up with a phone call inviting the family to participate if they felt comfortable. The purpose of this initial meeting was to allow the potential participants a chance to get acquainted with myself before deciding if they wanted to participate. This was an attempt to avoid any coercion or pressure they might have felt either from the agency, myself, or even other family members. Most of the families/participants did not wish for me to complete this step, but felt that they were quite comfortable talking about their experiences without an initial meeting. Where this meeting did occur, a family information sheet (see Appendix B) was filled out; otherwise it was completed at the interview. It was made clear that there was no obligation to participate, that all the

participants were free to withdraw at any time, and all responses would be kept confidential. The parents were also informed that should any child reveal situations of abuse, it would be reported to their agency.

When an individual or family stated a willingness to participate, both the children who were still living at home and their parents, as well as the adult children were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendices C & D). It was stressed to the parents that while they would be invited to a focus group which would allow them to reflect on the general themes which the children expressed, they would not be told the specific answers which their children shared with me. This was to maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees. Care was taken to avoid obvious identification of any data sources during the focus groups as well as in this report.

The interviews were based on non-directive, open questions which allowed the respondents to answer in their own words, rather than to respond to pre-set categories (Foddy, 1993). This procedure of in-depth interviewing has been referred to by Kahn and Kannell (1957) as "conversation with a purpose" (in Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 82). The questions (see Appendices E & F) were designed to explore a few general topics, but otherwise the participants were free to frame and structure the responses with respect to their reality (p. 82).

It is important to note the limitations of this method. The interviews were based on personal interaction. This requires cooperation on the part of the respondent and good listening skills on my part. Assuming the respondents are willing participants, the questions may not have been appropriate to their reality. Careful

consideration had been made to keep the questions simple and flexible enough to be relevant to each participant's reality. During the interviews, the language of the questions was adapted to meet the verbal comprehension level of the interviewees.

Managing, Recording and Analyzing Data

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. A master copy of the transcripts with all names erased was made on floppy disc and kept separate from the personal information, which was filed.

Certain elements in qualitative research strengthen the theories which emerge from the data. Patton (1980) highlights the two processes which Guba (1978) describes as necessary in developing category systems: "convergence" and "divergence". Patton suggests that "the problem of convergence is figuring out what things fit together" (1980, p. 311). As the researcher develops categories, she continues to verify the meaningfulness and accuracy of these categories. Divergence refers to the researcher's attempts to "flesh out" categories (p. 312). The convergence and divergence evident in my analysis of the data collected is conveyed through the repetition and emotional intensity of particular topics of discussion. The importance placed on the subjective understandings of family structure was a theme which converged in the data. Distinctions identified by participants regarding the perspectives which family structure took, created concepts which diverged from each other.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggest that similar to the concept of what is

considered truth in the positivist paradigm, there are four criteria which need to be addressed in the analysis of qualitative research. These include: credibility (internal validity); transferability (external validity); dependability (reliability); and confirmability (objectivity). Credibility is generated in this study through the triangulation of data between parents and children. The concepts which originated from the interviews with the biological children were presented to, and discussed by parents. This method of triangulating different sources of data increases the credibility of the data. Occasional debriefing sessions with a colleague also contributed to the credibility of the concepts as this allowed me to articulate and discuss the themes which emerged from my analysis of the data.

Dependability and confirmability are maintained through the use of journal notes which track the frequency and dates of contacts made with agencies and families, dates and times of interviews and focus groups, personal reflections (of the researcher) and the emergence of themes which appeared to be central in the data collected. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the use of such a "reflexive journal" is one item in a "trail of materials" which attests to the dependability of the concepts presented (p. 319). Other items suggested by Lincoln and Guba which were included in this research are the transcripts of raw data, data reduction and analysis products - such as theoretical notes and conceptual hunches, and the reconstruction of data in the synthesis product (this report) (p. 319). They also propose that the method of triangulation as discussed above contributes to the confirmability of the conclusions which a researcher establishes out of her research (p. 319).

The reflections of the parents on the concepts presented in this study also increased the credibility of these constructs. The children had described to me how they felt their family organized itself and the parents were asked to give their impressions of the constructs which I presented. Their affirmation of the concepts presented in this research suggests that the constructs are both dependable and confirmable.

As one's perspective of the roles and relationships in her family is subjective, transferability is limited. However, as discussed earlier, fostering presents a situation unique from families who do not foster. Through the personal in-depth interviews, the data presented here includes an in-depth description of the experiences of foster families. Lincoln and Guba (1985) list this quality as one method which adds the to transferability of data. Transferability is limited, however, as the purpose of this study is not to be definitive in scope, but rather to identify certain themes which may be applicable to families who chose to foster. It will be the task of individual families and other researchers to determine the extent that the results of this research can be transferred (or generalized) to other people's experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

One of the most intriguing dynamics presented by the participants of this study was the way they viewed their family's organization and the role that interviewees felt various family "members" (including foster children) had within that structure. The interviewees also revealed that the manner in which they viewed their family was not always the same as the way they felt their parents expected them to.

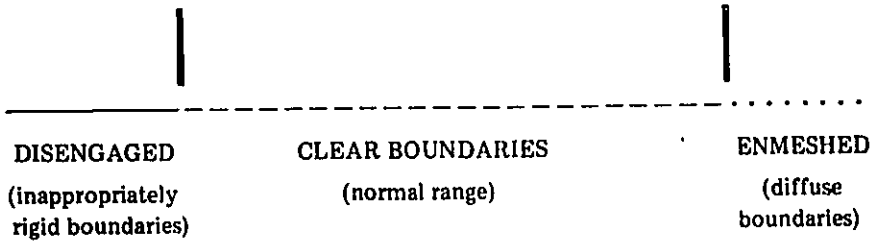
Depicted here are the alternative familial structural organizations drawn out of the descriptions of the interviewees' families. At first these diagrams were drawn merely to assist myself in understanding the arrangements of the families described. However, as I continued to consider the reflections of the participants, I decided to invite the responses of the parents to the various arrangements portrayed in these diagrams. The parents found these depictions to be useful in conceptualizing alternative familial organizations. Much discussion was generated in the focus groups based on the concepts presented.

The identifying characteristic of the first diagram is the 'open boundary' whereas for the second it is the 'solid nucleus'. Included in the discussion of these constructs are issues such as the ability to participate in decision-making, feelings of priority, pressures to be examples, and survival techniques. Figure C represents a contingency model which depicts the manner in which some participants adapted to either of the previous models. Participants identified elements of family life which were important to them regardless of the preferred family perspective. These elements consisted of the age and awareness level of the biological child, the ability to make

decisions in the family, pressures to be examples, and the openness of communication within a family. These issues as well as an overall assessment of the fostering experience will be presented in the next chapter.

After portraying the thoughts of the interviews into diagrams and inviting the parents' responses, it was suggested to me that the boundary lines utilized in these figures resemble the literature on family systems theory, particularly the conceptualizations of Minuchin (1974). Minuchin's depictions of healthy and disfunctional families were not presented for discussion to the parents but are discussed here as a point of clarification. Although the diagrams below utilize elements which are similar to those in family systems theory, these pictorial conceptualizations deviate somewhat from those intended in structural therapy.

Minuchin utilized family boundaries in this way:



(1974, p. 54)

These lines are used to "refer to a transactional style, or a preference for a type of interaction" between family members (Minuchin, 1974, p. 55). The diagrams presented in this research do not aim to depict the actual interaction between family members, but rather the *perspective* which individual members have regarding the exclusion and inclusion of various members into their family.

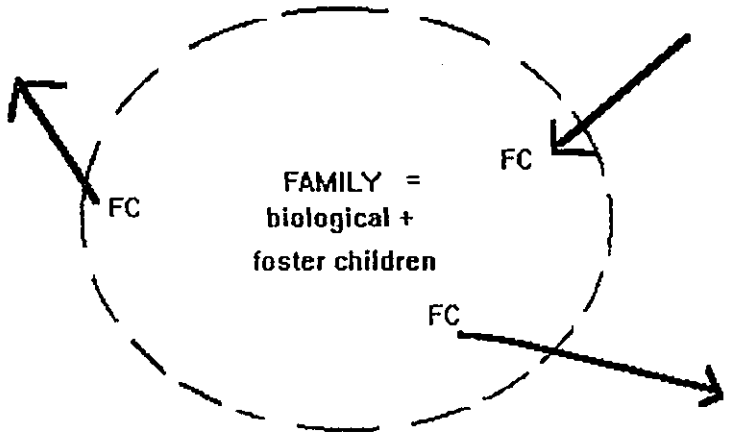
Minuchin's categorization is helpful in maintaining an overall perspective regarding family dynamics in this study. The families who participated in this study do not demonstrate either disengaged nor enmeshed patterns of interacting. Rather, the experiences which they describe fall in the normal range of Minuchin's depiction. Within this range, the participants have identified different ways of organizing families while incorporating foster children into their homes. Therefore, the depictions presented here reflect alternative ways to organize family relationships within the normal range of Minuchin's classification.

The alternate familial arrangements are described here as Open Boundary, Solid Nucleus, and as a contingency model, Selective Integration. The style of lines used in the depictions of those structures, presented below, portrays the degree to which individuals outside of the biological relationships are included in one's definition of family. The solid line represents a clear and unalterable definition of family members and breaks in this line illustrate the individual's tendency to incorporate some members outside of the biological nucleus into the definition of family. Therefore, while Minuchin's utilization of a solid line is intended to reflect a dysfunctional family with rigid boundaries, its utilization in this document (i.e. Figure B) is with the intention of depicting a clear distinction between the perception of biological members of the "family" and foster members in the home.

The diagrams do not depict actual behaviour. It was discovered that although interviewees may have contrasting sentiments on who should be considered "family", this did not necessarily dictate the manner in which the foster children in those

families were treated. For example, children from both solid and open line boundary perspectives stated that their foster siblings had the same rules and privileges as them. Also the alternate categories did not always determine whether or not the biological children enjoyed having foster siblings in their home. Participants felt it was important to them whether their perspective was congruent with the one their parents held. Both the children and parent participants also stated that their preference for one construct sometimes conflicted with the one they felt was the proper or "right" one to project. Some families also felt pressure from the fostering agency to operate in a way that reflected a different perception of family than they had. These elements, a sense of harmony between family members and congruence between their personal preference and what they felt was ethical, contributed to whether fostering was a positive experience for them.

Figure A.1: Open Boundary



This diagram depicts situations where individuals felt that the entire family had

integrated the foster children (FC) completely into that family. "I try to think of everyone as part of the family. I try and make relationships with everyone even though it's hard because there's quite a few of us. ...to get them into one family in my mind." This interviewee revealed her attempt to treat everyone in her home equally and to regard her biological and foster siblings as 'family', without keeping a clear distinction between the foster and biological members.

Several parents suggested that this structure was the most appropriate way to help the foster children. The total acceptance of the foster child into the family was described as "unconditional love" and viewed by some as the best way to give the foster children a "second chance". In an effort to actualize the 'open boundary' structure, parents claimed that the manner in which the foster and biological children were treated was exactly the same. "And so you take them [the foster children] and you treat them as family. They have the same responsibilities and privileges as anyone else in the house." Parents also stated that discipline standards were the same for both groups of children, while the actual discipline was determined by the behaviour in question. Several of the interviewees also made this claim. "I don't think there were different standards. I just think there were different behaviours."

Some of the interviewees suggested that there was a discrepancy between who they as children considered their 'family', and who their parents expected them to consider as part of their family. This was expressed to one interviewee as the expectation for her to love the foster children 'unconditionally', just as she was expected to love any other member in her family. This participant summarized her

frustration in this way: "Everyone else says 'unconditional love, unconditional love no matter what' and I'm like 'I can't do it, sorry'." In this family, the child was unable to fulfil the expectations she felt her parents had laid out for her. Other interviewees suggested that they reacted to this expectation by avoiding the foster children all together. One stated, "I just wouldn't do anything with them."

Some of the biological children who incorporated the foster children into their concept of family referred to the foster children as brothers and sisters even after they had left. However, not everyone did. A numerical proportion of interviewees who did include past foster siblings as family is not possible, as this was not a specific question asked the participants and only came up as a topic of discussion when the respondent included this aspect into the discussion. When one interviewee, who claimed to consider the foster children as family, was asked if a foster sibling who had left after five years with them was considered 'family', he replied, "Not any more." He also professed that another foster sibling would be considered family "'til she leaves." The children who were still at home and who included the foster children in their concept of family usually only mentioned the ones living with them at that time. However, one parent suggested that her biological children do remind her at times of foster children who have left their home. She professed,

> Many times I'll be telling someone I have [number of biological] kids, and [the oldest biological child] will say, 'No, you forgot [a foster child who had left their home]!' And people are looking at me like 'You don't know how many kids you have?'

Several interviewees also suggested that the foster children sometimes made

it difficult for them to actualize a completely 'open boundary' family. The biological children felt that this was difficult for them to do because of the attitudes and expectations of the foster children, as well as the reality that their identities are often formed with regards to another family system.

> You get this sort of feeling like, kind of like, you want them to forget that [they have another family]? Like they're part of your family, now; 'That's not your family anymore! We are your family, so don't talk about them!'

Therefore, although the biological children attempted to incorporate the foster children into their own perception of 'family', they found it difficult when the foster siblings did not develop their own identity and sense of belonging in their foster family.

Some parents felt that the open boundary as depicted in this diagram was beneficial both to the foster children as well as to their own biological children. "You give them [FC] the benefit of the doubt and... you take them and you treat them as family; they have the same responsibilities and privileges as anyone else". Another parent claimed, "the goal that we try to achieve [is that] our foster kids believe that our family is like [an open boundary]. That is what we want them to try to buy into because that is how we are going to develop the most change in them." They also felt that their biological children learned how to accept and help other people when the foster children were incorporated into their concept of 'family'. One parent who described the way they interact with the foster children as an open boundary system stated, "life is about giving and receiving and interacting with other humans...[the biological children] can choose to use it for good."

Decision-Making in an Open Boundary Family

The biological children often supported the importance of knowing that they had a voice in their family. Families who operated as an 'open boundary' network also sought to include the participation of foster children in decision-making. One parent stated that when their family considered having a new foster child come into their home, both the biological children and the foster children would be included in this decision. "We talked with the other [foster] children as well as our own natural children about another child coming into the home." In this way, fostering was viewed as an endeavour which included all of the members of the family, including the children. Therefore the biological children -and sometimes the foster children- were involved in a direct and proactive manner.

While some of the parents maintained that they always informed their biological children of what was happening with the foster children, others were less sure of the role their biological children should have in fostering. Some parents expressed concern over giving their biological children too much responsibility. The age of the biological child was an important factor to parents when considering how much "ownership" to give. Parents who asked their biological children how they felt about fostering, were at times hesitant to react when their children expressed dislike. While desiring to allow their children to voice their concerns and participate in the family, parents felt that the ultimate decision of whether to foster or not was too great a pressure to place upon a young child.

Although actively giving the biological children freedom to participate was

noted as a positive alternative by many parents, they were not always clear about how to incorporate these children. "More often than not, we rarely give our kids choices. Even if we do, a lot of times they respond to us in the way that they think that mom and dad want. That's if you ask them." Several parent participants stated that even though they conceptualized their family as an open boundary, the "bottom line" for them was whether or not their biological children reacted strongly against fostering. "If it was terrible for her [the biological child] we wouldn't do it [fostering]." Having received the initial 'approval' from their daughter, this family began to foster by including the foster children as 'family', and inviting the participation of all 'family' members into important family decisions.

Feeling Less Important

The interviewees suggested that if they felt that they were not a priority, it changed their relationship with their parents resulting in their feeling that they had "lost" their family because of the foster children in their home. Some interviewees suggested that this regret was a possible outcome of an 'open boundary' family. This sentiment was revealed by interviewees who felt that their parents valued everyone in their home equally, resulting in the awareness that they did not have the exclusive attention of their parents which children in "normal families" had. Because of their parents' focus on the many needs of the foster children, the biological children often felt neglected.

> We knew they [the parents] were there, but they weren't really there for us...they spent so much time with the

> other kids, they didn't get so much time to spend with their [biological] kids.

Another factor which contributed to the biological children's satisfaction or frustration with their experiences in fostering, was the value which they felt their parents attributed to the feelings which these children expressed. Similar to the issue of priority, the biological children sometimes felt that in an open boundary family, their problems did not compare in magnitude to the issues which the foster children brought with them. Therefore, they did not feel that they were allowed to express the dilemmas which they experienced because they were never as dramatic as those of the foster children. "I got the idea that if I had a problem it was smaller than any problem that these kids had? So I shouldn't bother anyone with this problem because she [the mother] had too many other problems to deal with." In this situation, the biological child felt that in comparison to the foster children, her experiences were not as great a concern to her parents as those of the foster children which were deemed more "important".

Several individuals expressed anger at feeling that they could not bother their parents with their negative feelings. Some participants also suggested that their parents disregarded these feelings. "My parents made me feel that my feelings weren't as important because these other kids' feelings were more important. And I should feel that too?" Another interviewee stated, "I'm expected to be good and in comparison I must admit that I haven't had to go through that [the experiences of the foster children]. So I must be grateful." This interviewee suggested that her parents constantly reminded her of "how good [she] had it" and were therefore impatient with

her complaints. It is clear that these situations caused the biological children to feel devalued and less of a priority to their parents than the foster children. There was a tendency in an open boundary family for interactions to be based upon behaviour. Therefore, some parents felt that in order to be fair to everyone, the biological children were not treated in a special manner. However, the behaviours of the foster children demanded more responses from the parents than did the behaviours of the biological children. In some families, this caused the biological children to feel less valued because they received less attention.

Living with the Behaviours of Foster Children

Similar to Part's study (1993), one of the most consistent difficulties which the biological children in this study disclosed was dealing with the behaviours of the foster children. This affected them personally when their foster siblings would do something to them, but also indirectly when they saw their parents distressing over the bad behaviours of the foster children. Interviewees had many stories of incidents which happened to them inflicted by the foster children.

It appeared to be more of a challenge for the children who conceptualized their family as an 'open boundary' system to tolerate the deviant behaviours of their foster siblings. Interviewees professed that it was often more difficult for them to handle the behaviours of the foster children if their parents expressed dismay over them.

> And when he [the foster child] lets her [the mother] down like that, she gets really disappointed. ...And it's harder for us, you know; she [the mother] feels really hurt, or whatever, I can't find the right word, but it

affects us too.

This empathic connection to their parents was expressed by interviewees of all ages. However, the older children stated that they were at times able to express their concern to their parents while the younger interviewees could not remember *talking* about how they felt with their parents. Yet when I asked them how they felt when they saw their parents becoming frustrated they easily *identified* their feelings. One young child explained how he felt when his parents tell the foster children how to behave and...

interviewee: ...they don't listen and they don't make good choices.
interviewer: How do you feel when they don't listen to your parents?
interviewee: Very bad. It makes me angry.

This was a revealing conclusion given the age of this interviewee and the intensity of the emotion expressed. Several biological children stated that when they were young, they were often not aware of or not able to articulate their feelings. Yet this participant revealed that he was aware of the impact of the behaviour of the foster children have on him. Another participant disclosed to her mother her personal feelings of feeling threatened and belittled when the foster children mistreated her mother. Her mother recalls her biological daughter saying, "you know, when [the foster child] calls you [the mother] those names it's just like she's calling me those names."

When a Foster Child Leaves

During the initial stages of this study, several parents suggested that an

important issue for them was how to help their biological children deal with the times when a foster child must leave their home. The responses of the interviewees depended somewhat on how they viewed their relationship with the foster children. One family who described their home as an 'open boundary' system felt that the recent departure of a foster child had difficult emotional repercussions for all of the members -including the biological children. One interviewee recalls her feelings when a foster brother left her family. "He [FC] was like a brother to me? Not just a foster brother? So...I cried when he left." Because of the inclusion of the foster child into the conception of this participant's 'family', their separation was a painful experience.

However, not all of the biological children who maintained that the 'open boundary' configuration was the goal in their family, expressed great concern or grief regarding the departure of foster siblings. Even when a long-term foster child left, one participant reflected, "But you kind of, when you have foster kids you kind of expect them to leave at some point in time. So, when they leave, it's not really a hard thing? But it is on my mom." The primary concern for this biological child was the emotional welfare of the mother, rather than her personal experience.

The parents expressed their disappointment and sadness when a foster child left unexpectedly, and assumed that their biological children would feel the same. In an 'open boundary' system where foster children are regarded as family members, this sense of loss is understandable. However, the interviewees in this sample suggested that their experiences did not always resemble those of their parents. One parent revealed that part of her pain in dealing with the recent loss of a foster child was due

to the fact that she felt that she "wasn't quite finished working with [the foster child] yet." This sentiment reflects the unique investment and expectations which foster parents might have, but do not necessarily reflect the experiences of the biological children. Rather than grieving over their personal sense of loss, biological children were more aware of the feelings their parents experienced when a foster child left.

Motivation and Parental Guilt in Fostering

When asked about why they began to foster, many parents described their desire to help disadvantaged children. Some of the parents assumed that their biological children shared this desire; other parents saw their role as foster parent as something which they chose to do simply because *they* wanted to. One parent admitted "I am happy here, it's very selfish too. As a happy parent I am better for my children." Another participant described fostering as an "addiction" where "people feel compelled to keep going" because of the need they perceive in the foster children rather than their own enjoyment or the needs of their biological children.

This interplay between the parents' own desire to foster and the wishes of their children created tension for some families, particularly if demands were made upon the biological children which these children resented. Some parents felt guilt over the impact that fostering had on their families, causing their biological children to be angry or disappointed.

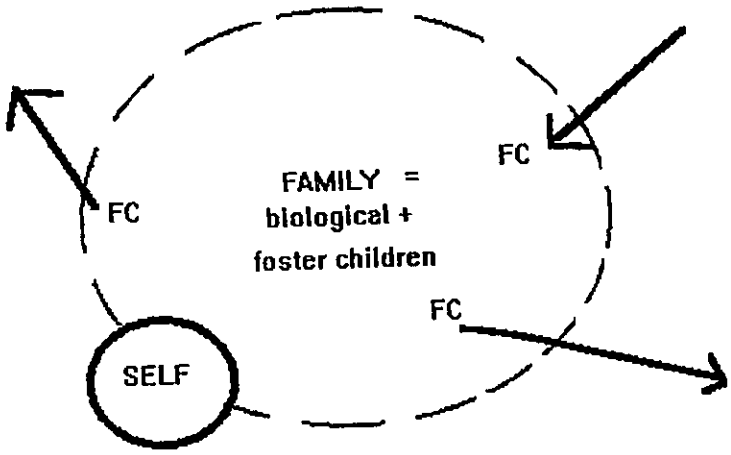
An area of concern regarding the 'open boundary' conceptualization of families, was the lack of emphasis placed on the biological children. Even though

some parents supported having a family which completely integrated the foster children, they occasionally struggled with their uncertainty of who should be a priority: the foster children with their many un-met needs and extreme behaviours, or the biological children who "never asked for this". One parent revealed her anxiety in the way she treated her foster and biological children. "One of my biggest problems has been that I do treat them all the same, but I shouldn't." Some parents revealed that the attitude of the agency also contributed to, or alleviated this guilt. While several families felt pressure from their respective agency to maintain an 'open boundary' system where the attention given is in response to need, others perceived a freedom from their agency which allowed them to attend to their biological children without feeling guilty about not giving their "all" to the foster children.

Survival Technique: Partial Seclusion

Several interviewees disclosed that while acknowledging the expectation to live as an integrated unit with the foster children, they felt that their own needs and abilities were not recognized. Therefore, they described their presence in the family as separate from the rest of the members in their household. This response for survival is depicted below.

Figure A.2: Survival: Partial Seclusion



The "SELF" is the biological child. Some individuals felt that they could not invest emotionally in the foster children and therefore separated themselves from them. This response occurred with foster children who were close in age to the biological child, as well as when there was an age gap of four years or more. However, participants only identified or enacted this reaction when they were older, usually in adolescence. None of the younger children (under thirteen) described situations of self-imposed seclusion. The factors which seemed to trigger this separation were the age of the biological children and the behaviour of the foster child. One respondent stated that he simply ignored the foster children; another revealed that she could not even stand being in the same room as them.

Another cause for the personal seclusion on the part of the biological children seemed to be the pressures they felt from their parents to accept everyone into their family, and their own inability to do so. As a result, they found themselves distanced

from both the foster children and their parents -and sometimes their biological siblings as well. "I can analyze it now and say... 'that's how I dealt with it'. I isolated myself, moved myself out, made sure I dealt with me on the outside". These children expressed a resentment towards the amount of time and energy their parents invested in the foster children instead of them.

For some children this situation of living in a family with an open boundary was detrimental to their sense of belonging, as Eastman (1979) warned could happen in foster families. The difficulty experienced in knowing who belonged to the family led to the biological child's separation. This response of individual separation raises some concerns particularly because of the intensity of anger and disillusionment which was expressed. As in the Twigg study (1994), these biological children directed their anger towards their parents, feeling that they were somehow "lost in the shuffle" and made to feel less important. This response was noted in families which attempted to live as an 'open boundary' system. The children may be responding to "family boundary ambiguity" by their withdrawal, which is described as:

> a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system (Boss & Greenberg, 1984, p. 536).

Boss and Greenberg also state that uncertainty about one's "belongingness" results in "high individual tension that is reduced only when the individual can clearly identify the boundary markers of the group to which he [she] belongs" (p. 540). The biological children who were unsure of their position in the family chose to withdraw emotionally in order to create a clear boundary around themselves.

One parent illustrated this dynamic of boundary ambiguity from her family. One of her biological children began to misbehave uncharacteristically. Through the help of an agency employee it became clear to them that this young girl was uncertain of her place in the family and was therefore acting out in an effort to see if her parents would move her out of their family because of her behaviour. The uncertainty of her place in her family caused her enough stress to test the boundaries.

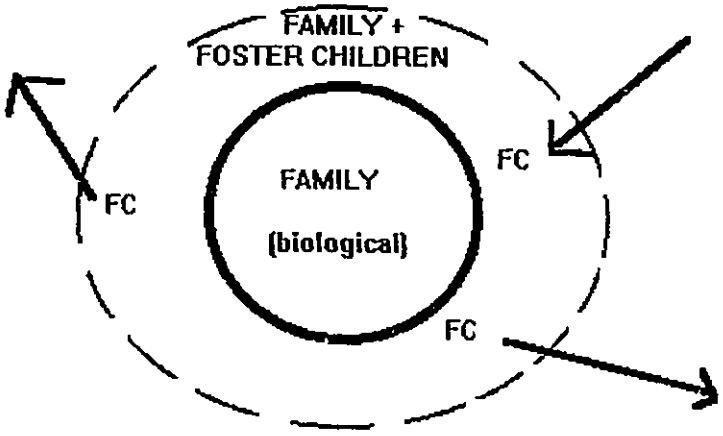
This scenario resembles the story of the biological child in "Dean's" foster family of the Casey Family Program (Walsh & Walsh, 1990). With the introduction of a foster sibling and the uncertainty of their own position in the family, biological children may seek to have those boundaries more clearly defined. After the first set of parents realized the cause of their biological child's behaviour they directed more attention towards her, gave her special treatment and told her that she was not a foster child and would not be removed from that home. In this way, the parents assisted their child in defining boundaries which were previously unclear.

Other interviewees suggested that instead of testing their parents, they chose to create their own boundaries -around themselves. Although there is a natural stage in the family cycle where teenagers move towards individuation, these respondents did not see their self-imposed seclusion as a natural part of growing up, but as a painful result of having their needs and desires devalued and feeling insecure about their sense of belonging in the family.

The parents who espoused the values of establishing a family with an 'open boundary' stated that the isolation demonstrated in this diagram was due to a lack of

communication between parents and children. "And so there's a lot of children who would feel very much like that, that when there's no communication." Another parent stated that she felt that her biological child was "very secure in her relationship" with her parents and therefore was able to include the foster children as family, without feeling the need to separate herself as in the depiction above.

Figure B: Solid Nucleus



While Eastman claimed that all foster families must operate as open systems, the individuals who perceived their biological family as a solid nucleus did not describe such a scenario. This diagram is intended to depict the experiences of respondents who felt that their family was comprised solely of the biological family. Foster children were taken into their home (the dotted circle) but did not become part of the family nucleus in the centre of the diagram.

> I never considered them [FC] relatives or part of my family or anything. Even though they were there and

> we never asked questions or anything... we never considered them part of our family.

In this reality, foster children could come and go with minimal emotional trauma to the biological children who felt secure in their place in the family. The families in Ellis' study (1972) also support the experiences of these families in their assumption that a distinction between biological and foster children is necessary.

Separation was sometimes seen as a necessary procedure from the parents' perspective, in some circumstances.

> Sometimes you need to keep your family a little separate because of the kids that you bring in. Your kids could be at risk, not just because of them getting bad ideas but because of the things that some of these kids bring with them, like, you know, drugs and things.

Creating distance was also deemed necessary if respondents felt burnt out, especially when the foster children left unexpectedly after a lengthy period with them. One parent reflected after a long-time foster child left, "It's an emotional stake...you might get desensitized over that". Therefore one way for parents (and children) to be able to cope emotionally, is to create a clear distinction between who is permanent 'family' and who is more transient. Emotional investment increases with the stability of the individual, and therefore the biological children and the parents have the closest relationships.

Even within such a perspective, there did exist some confusion in the minds of the interviewees.

> I have an idea of like who my family is, like without foster kids, and who the foster kids are. I still say they're my brother and sister but then I tell people,

'Two are my real sisters, and one is my foster sister'.

Several biological children felt more comfortable when the distinction between family members -foster and biological- was clear. One interviewee stated that when the foster children referred to their 'other' mother and father, "I was glad because you know, these are my parents and they're not her [FC's] parents."

Although several participants felt that a clear understanding of the roles and relationships in their families was important, not all of the interviewees were sure of what the perspectives of other members in their family were, even though they were quite able to articulate a personal conceptualization of their family. Even the two biological siblings interviewed had a different reflection regarding who they labelled "family". By asking each of them who they would include in their family, it became apparent that even between siblings different conceptualizations of family occur. One sibling included a particular foster sibling while the other individual did not.

The participants also indicated that their view which distinguished between their biological family and the foster children who lived in their home, was influenced by the foster children's expectations.

> Like they [the FC] had problems with their family but they still need their family? You know, they still want to be with their family? And so a lot of times... they would say 'mom' and 'dad' to my parents, but then if they got mad with them, they'd say 'you're not my mom; you're not my dad; you're not my parents;' and... we always understood them to be that way. Like we knew that this is our family and these people are outside of our family.

In contrast to the families who sought an 'open boundary', these families organized

themselves as a nuclear unit who opened their home, but not their family identity, to foster children. Thomlison suggests that "the treatment family needs to consider itself as part of the [foster] children's larger family system and network, and not as a substitute family" (1991, p. 3). Rather than pressuring the foster children to accept the people who provide an alternative home for them as their 'family', this approach allows the foster children and the biological children to maintain their unique sense of family identity.

The Biological Children as a Priority

The biological children who perceived their family as a solid nucleus felt certain of their personal worth in their parents' eyes. In comparison to some of the children who viewed their family as an 'open boundary', these children sensed that they were a priority to their parents. This belief stemmed from the manner in which their parents treated them and what they were told by their parents. In addition, it was helpful when the children felt that their personal experiences mattered to their parents and were not pushed aside because of the behaviours of the foster children.

Both children and adult interviewees suggested that when they felt that their feelings mattered to their parents they were more apt to feel positively about having foster children in their home. "For a long time my mom's always said 'you're our number one priority, if something's not working for you, we'll fix it, we'll change it'." Having their feelings valued also made the biological children feel that they were able to be more active as participants in the decisions around fostering. "I

talked to my parents about it [fostering] and they said if ever there's problems and we just... can't keep him, then, they'll listen to us [the biological children]". This interviewee stated that her parents respected her opinion and allowed her to participate in the decisions around fostering, while maintaining a distinction between herself and her biological siblings and the foster children.

Survival Techniques

A parent proclaimed, "I feel like it is the only way to survive... [while pointing to the depiction of a 'solid nucleus']. I used to feel guilty about that, that we all got to be one." Similar to the pressures the children expressed regarding the incorporation of foster siblings into their family concept, several parents also stated that they felt a similar compulsion.

At times the impetus for this drive was generated by the agency which the families were involved with. Because the child welfare system focuses on the well-being of foster children, case workers often focused solely on the best interests of the foster children, at the exclusion of the needs of the biological children. Therefore social workers may feel compelled to emphasize the total inclusion of the foster child into the family system in the belief that this would be the most beneficial situation for the foster child. While most parents stated that this expectation was not spoken directly, they felt that this presumption was there nonetheless.

Disconcerting feelings for both the parents and their biological children occurred when they felt that they were not 'right' in their preference for a solid

biological nucleus in the family; that they should feel a concern and develop an attachment to the foster children similar to those which occurred within their biological families. Although many parents felt this pressure, one means of surviving as a "healthy" family was to keep the distinction between foster and biological children clear. Some parents even felt that their agency supported them in this decision which alleviated the guilt experienced by other parents experiencing a pressure in opposition to their chosen perspective.

Some children revealed that although they viewed their family as a solid nucleus, they felt that their parents did not. The pressures associated with parental expectations, agency expectations and the reality of the presence and behaviours of the foster children led to the development of survival skills on the part of the biological children.

Several individuals described how they had "survived" while living with foster children in their home.

> It was kind of like, how do I deal with -it was a survival- how do I deal with having this child in this house without really affecting me? You become an individual, you really do your own thing. You take care of yourself.

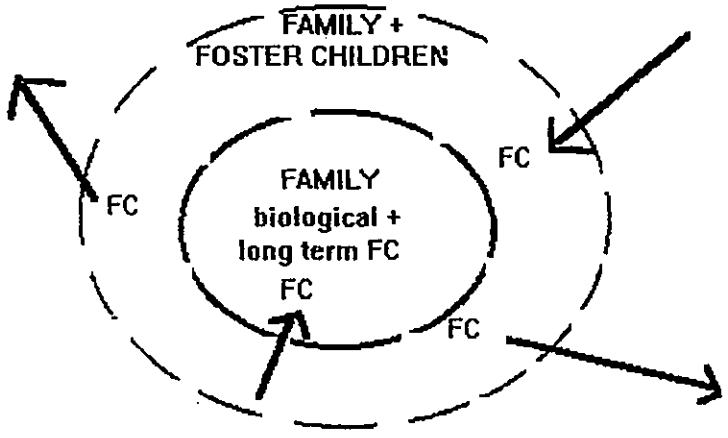
Busy lives -with many activities to take them away from their house- was a common scenario for the older interviewees. "Every chance I got to go out, I did." Another interviewee recalled that while growing up with foster siblings, "We [this individual and the biological siblings] were always out somewhere or another... I've always been busy." The hectic schedule developed by the biological children would keep them

from having to deal with the pressures of home. One interviewee recalled, "I wasn't there [at home] an awful lot." Another participant stated, "I just didn't really like the situation [at home] and so I worked three jobs." As these individuals developed alternatives for themselves, they developed an ability to create an emotional distance from what was going on in their families. "You kind of get an indifference to people coming and going." Even though there may have existed a clear separation in the minds of the interviewees between the foster and biological members of their household, not all of the biological children felt that the distinction alone was enough to make fostering a positive experience. A busy lifestyle kept them separate from the foster children; however, several adult children expressed disappointment because they did not feel emotionally connected to their parents either.

A large number of people all living in the same home may foster a hectic pace of life which the biological children adopt into their personal agenda's. While this appeared to be the case for a number of interviewees, it was not the situation for all the participants. For instance, some of the individuals who chose to be active outside the house were from families where there were more than five (biological and foster) children. However, one individual who only had one biological sibling and, on average, two foster siblings at one time in their home, also claimed to use a busy personal schedule as a means to survival. While the number of people living together may be indicative of a busy family, it is not the sole determinant, as a foster (or biological) child with many needs may also lead to a cluttered itinerary, especially for the parents.

Another strategy for dealing with the stresses of foster children was for the biological children to take on a different role. "I parentified myself, kind of took on that role and didn't mind at the time. It felt good to help someone else". This alternative was at times supported by the parents. "Our parents have said to them, just because of the way they've made it clear that... what we [as biological children] say goes also". Although several interviewees felt that they were also responsible for the behaviour of the foster children, many parents were careful to say that they do not expect their children to act as caretakers, recognizing the potentially harmful situation of confused roles between siblings and parents.

Figure C: Contingency Model: Selective Integration



Several of the interviewees did include some, but not all, of the foster children in their concept of "family". They demonstrated a selective approach towards which

foster children qualified. Foster children who were present in the home for a long time were more likely to be included in the family concept, as indicated by the semi-permeable boundary surrounding the nucleus in the centre of the diagram.

> The last few kids we've had for about three years. So when I meet people I say, 'this is my brother -these are my brothers'. It wouldn't be 'these are my foster brothers', but 'these are my brothers'.

One interviewee stated that she did not like the ambiguity surrounding the presence of the foster children in the outer ring of the diagram and preferred for them to be adopted to allow them entrance into the central circle (the 'family'). "But that's one thing about foster kids, once they're adopted they're sort of like, reassurance for them and for you? You know, no one can take them away? Cause it hurts when they take them away".

In this way, family members did not feel forced to include all the foster children in their home as 'family', but neither did they completely discount them from becoming family. Participants who described their family in this way were able to choose who they would become emotionally invested in. The foster children in the outer ring were not emotionally close to the biological children and therefore did not cause an emotional upheaval when they left. "When he [FC] was gone I didn't really miss him because there wasn't any attachment there." On the other hand, respondents suggested that when there was an emotional bond to the foster child, their removal was a painful experience.

Attempting a Consensus

While some interviewees and parents seemed comfortable accepting and maintaining a distinction between the foster and biological children, others stated that they had "mixed emotions", and still others professed that they were most happy when the foster children were completely integrated into their family. One parent claimed that "all three [open boundary, solid nucleus, and selective integration] are incorporated in different ways" in their family. Another parent stated that his family alternated between the different diagrams at different times. Not all of the children were sure about who was 'in' and who was 'outside of' their family, either. Yet some interviewees stated that they felt pressure to think of the foster children as 'family' even when they did not feel able to do so.

Among the parents there was considerable debate concerning which approach would be most suitable for families who choose to foster. The depiction of a solid nucleus has the obvious benefit of being an emotionally secure place for the biological children. Some of the participants felt that this was the most appropriate diagram for them because the foster children also make that distinction. "You have a distinction obviously, because it's real. But they [the foster kids] do too. They have a mom and dad somewhere and they know that." Other parents felt that the perception of a solid nucleus was important because it demonstrated a healthy family boundary to the foster children. "What you do then is that you show them [the FC] the centre of [this nucleus], which is a healthy family."

There did appear to be somewhat of a conflict for some parents. Some felt

that while one diagram (i.e. the solid nucleus) was the best one for their biological children, this was not necessarily the one which they felt would get the most positive results with their foster children (i.e. the open boundary). Parents also stated (without identifying them) that "one [depiction] is reality, and the others are attitude". Another parent espoused the incorporation of each one of the figures:

> This [solid nucleus] is what our biological kids see and I want them to see it as this, but I want them to be able to buy into [selective integration], and I want the foster kids to buy into this one [open boundary] in hopes that they might get here [selective integration].

Another parent replied to this conglomeration of perspectives with the concern that "my very actions would be confusing to them [the biological and foster children]".

There is not a clear consensus from the participants in this study whether one particular model of perceiving family members is more appropriate than the others. The open boundary configuration appeared to be the most favoured by parents when considering the needs of the foster children. However, others have argued that the foster children may not regard themselves as members of the foster family and may even benefit from experiencing a "normal" or "healthy" biological family. The biological children were not in complete agreement on which arrangement was the most favoured, either. The solid nucleus perspective afforded the biological children with a secure position in the family, but did not necessarily dictate that they would appreciate their family's involvement in fostering. The selective integration approach is presented here as a contingency model which allows family members to choose which members they want to invest in, reducing the stress of treating everyone equally

when they did not feel the same emotional ties to all the individuals in their household. The inclusion of particular foster siblings was contingent on their behaviour in that family, the length of their stay, and the probability of remaining a part of that family in the future.

Defensive Positions

There was a tendency for some parents to dismiss or minimize the negative feelings which the interviewees expressed. One parent claimed, "You could ask any adult kid and they would answer exactly the same no matter what the parents were doing." While caution does need to be taken when trying to isolate important factors in such a complex situation as family dynamics, it is not the purpose of this study to judge families in relation to each other, nor is it the purpose to assume cause and effect. Rather, the assumption is that foster families have stresses and dilemmas which are unique to their experience as foster families. Therefore it is important not to become defensive but to simply try to identify some of those characteristics, strengthening the ones which appear to be positive, and mitigating the negative aspects of fostering. The biological children as well as their parents have suggested that the expectations a family has regarding the place of foster children is one such unique dynamic. Issues which arise out of these perspectives are important for families to address in order to avoid some of the negative effects of fostering.

There was also some evidence of cross-blaming. Children who expressed anger at feeling less valued, blamed their parents for rejecting them. Some parents

placed complete responsibility for the negative feelings of their biological child onto that child. One participant suggested that communication between the parent and biological child was not a problem, but rather that child's attitude. "I think, not that a child cannot express himself, but he wants to believe he cannot, to service the need to be angry." Rather than looking for the root of the anger, this response addresses only the issue of how that child maintains his feelings, and therefore places sole responsibility for those feelings onto that child.

While feelings and expectations need to be recognized in a healthy family system, certain dynamics influence the articulation of these elements. Interviewees concluded that their age and awareness level contributed or inhibited their ability to understand and express their own responses to fostering. Furthermore, although neither parents nor children came to a clear decision regarding the relative value of the different familial structural depictions, both groups emphasized the importance of open communication regardless of the chosen perspectives.

CHAPTER FIVE: GENERAL ISSUES

Participants identified particular issues which they felt impacted on their experiences in fostering which were considered important regardless of the conceptualization they, or their parents had, of their family. These include the age and awareness of the biological children, their ability to participate in family decision-making, the pressures they experienced to be good, and the extent of open communication in their family. Finally, the overall assessment of fostering by the biological children is presented.

Age and Awareness

Age was one important determinant identified by the interviewees. Adult participants reflected back on their experiences and suggested that they felt differently about fostering depending on their age in relation to the age of the foster children. One participant revealed that when she was young (under seven years old) "they [the foster children] would ...play house with me and stuff like that and so, I mean, that was always fun". Another respondent suggested that while having foster siblings as "friends" worked for a short while, her attitude changed as she grew older.

> They tried to keep them more my age because they thought they were doing me a service so I would have people to play with. Um, so they kept it my age until I got to about six to ten myself when I didn't want them my age. Then they went down... and looked after younger children.

The impact of the age of the biological child is also noted in Ellis (1972). The parents in this study distinguish the ages between seven and thirteen as particularly

difficult years for their biological children to adjust to foster siblings.

One parent suggested that even for her teenage biological child, "they [this child and the foster child] tended to relate a little bit better to each other... when the foster children were closer in age -but not older than- the biological children." The importance of the biological children's age in relation to the foster children supports Ellis' (1972) findings that the oldest biological child may experience more difficulties when the age of the foster child is above their own. One interviewee divulged, "It was sort of difficult because I wasn't the big person, you know?" Another individual stated her confusion, "So, I was the oldest, now I'm the middle, so when people ask me: 'I'm the oldest middle' so that's kind of weird, but that's what I am." Some of these participants felt displaced and regretted their loss of status when older foster children entered their family. Similar comparisons to the alteration in ordinal position for the youngest child is not available from this study as none of the interviewees were the youngest in their family.

The gender of the biological child also made a difference in this study with regards to the age difference. Female participants were quite clear that when they got older they wanted their foster siblings to be younger than them and not the same age. The boys (still at home) didn't seem to mind what age the foster children were and one adult male suggested that it was easier for him when the foster children were his age even as a teenager because "we could do stuff together". Although Trasler's survey of failed foster placements revealed that most terminated placements occurred when the foster children were the same age and sex as the biological children, this

study suggests that the desire (or need) for an age gap between these two groups of children may be dependent both on the age and gender of the biological children. While older girls in this study preferred not to have the foster children their own age, the boys in this sample did not indicate strong feelings either way. This deviation from Trasler's findings may be due to sample size. Trasler's study included the investigation of sixteen families where the foster children were the same sex and within three years of age as the biological children (1960, p. 222). Five of the interviewees in the present study had experienced living with a foster sibling the same age, four of which were also the same sex as the foster children.

However, it appears that the ages of the biological children and the foster children both interact to form an important dynamic. It also seems apparent that the age of the child (7-13), gender of the child (girl) and where the foster child would fit in the ordinal position all interconnect and impact the experience of fostering. From the background literature and the information collected here it seems that parents would be ill-advised to foster a child older than their oldest child, who happens also to be a female between the ages of seven and thirteen. While certainly these generalizations are not definitive, it does suggest areas for further research and the need for a heightened sensitivity on the part of the parents to children who are in this 'high risk' group.

Similar to the conclusions of the Part study (1993), the adult children felt that they were not able to articulate their negative feelings as a child and that, if asked, they would likely have answered as their parents expected them to.

> Now that I think back it would have been better to have sat mom down and said 'Please get rid of this child because they are driving me nuts' but I mean that's hind-sight. That's nothing that I ever thought of as a kid, even though I really wanted them gone.

When another participant was asked why he did not express his frustrations to his parents, he replied "I was too young." Although some of the interviewees did not feel that they could share their feelings with their parents, it did not mean that these feelings went away as time went on. "It was a subconscious thing, and it manifested more to a conscious level of reacting when I was older". Therefore parents may be unaware of the struggles of their biological children while they are young, only to be surprised at their reactions when their children get older.

Several participants also revealed a sense of disillusionment that although they were able to express themselves as they grew older, they felt it was too late. "I've got my family back, we can do stuff now. Now we're too old to do it." Another adult individual stated that although family relationships suffered, "It's just too late to change that now".

These revelations suggest that parents should consider the ages of their biological children when contemplating the introduction of a foster child into their home. Particular attention has been directed towards the problem of the oldest child feeling displaced by a 'new-comer' and parents need to be sensitive to that potential problem when thinking about the relative age of the foster child. When inviting their biological children to share their feelings, parents need to be sensitive to the fact that younger children may not be completely aware of their own separate and unique

perspective, and may have difficulty expressing negative sentiments. The interviewees also suggested that the attitudes and experiences of children may change as they grow up. Therefore parents should not expect that because their biological children declared contentment with fostering at an early age, that this would still be the case years later.

Ability to Participate in Family Decision-Making

> They [the parents] were going 'Are you sure you want to do this?' like that, and we were like 'Yeah, O.K., sure'. So we went into these meetings and they talked about it. And then we said that we wanted to.

Whether their family embodied the 'open boundary' configuration, or the 'solid nucleus' conceptualization of family relationships, the biological children who felt that they were part of the decision-making process in fostering also felt more secure in their relationship to their parents and more kindly to the foster children than did the participants who suggested that they were not included in this process. One interviewee complained, "The kids came and I was never told. They just sort of showed up". This individual suggested that her parents simply expected that she would adapt to the new situations whether or not she approved of them. She revealed that this nonchalance of her parents regarding her personal acceptance of foster siblings created a difficult atmosphere for her.

Other interviewees suggested that it was easier for them to adapt when their parents invited and valued their input. One mother remarked, "I've given her [the biological child] some ownership in helping us? It's more like a family job to get

these kids." An interviewee described the approach of her family as "team work", while several others disclosed their role as reporters to their parents of the foster children's behaviour.

Regardless of the perceived configuration of family relationships, parents were not always in agreement on the role the biological (or foster) children should have in such a system. Some participants felt that the biological children should be active in making decisions which affect them, others included the biological as well as the foster children, while some parents claimed that the pressures associated with important decisions was unsuitable for their children. These parents either felt their children were too young to participate in a meaningful way, or that the issues were too difficult for them to handle.

Biological Children as Examples and the Pressure to be Good

Although some of the interviewees stated that they felt an expectation from their parents to be good, they did not seem to think that this pressure was intended or overwhelming for them. One parent stated that while she did make expectations for her biological children to be examples, this was not any different from the requirements she placed on foster children who had also been in their family for a length of time and who knew the rules. Another parent suggests that the pressure which biological children feel is real and inadvertent.

> Although we don't deliberately say to our kids 'Be an example', just from what we're saying, it's an unspoken request and yes, everybody in the family picks up on that. You don't have to say a word and the kids, our

kids feel that pressure.

Some parents revealed that although they relied to some extent on their children to be both examples and teachers to the foster children, they did not expect them to be "perfect" or to act beyond their developmental age. None of the children interviewed in this sample resented being put "in charge". Several interviewees suggested that the only time they taught "proper" behaviours to the foster children was when they chose to. One participant described her attempt at assisting the foster child in her home. "If we went out for dinner or something, then I would... help her get dressed or something, and I would tell her 'Sit straight'; 'Hold your knife and fork like this'." This individual also stated, "I don't really think that they [the parents] expected me to do anything for her? But... if I did something they said, 'That's good'." In this way, the biological children were free to choose the extent of their active participation in the fostering experience of their family.

One of the interviewees stated that the pressure she felt was not imposed by her parents as much as her personal interpretation.

> The foster kids were treated pretty much the same as me. And discipline was the same, but they only had to tell me once... When I was growing up I felt kind of like this necessity to be good because these kids had so much wrong with them.

Participants identified the pressure they felt from witnessing the greater restrictions which their parents placed on the foster children due to their more extreme behaviours. Often the biological children felt that their freedoms were therefore restricted as well. "My mom teaches these kids things and then when she wants to

talk to me she says that these kids have to do all that and then she makes me do some of that stuff". This child felt that his parents were responding more harshly to him because of the presence of the foster children. Another interviewee revealed that he felt a pressure to be good because he was afraid of the restrictions and negative consequences placed on the foster children when they acted in opposition to the rules.

Communication

Both parents and children asserted that communication was, or should be, an important part of the parent-child dynamics. There is nothing surprising about this, as communication is an important element in any relationship. However, many families felt so caught up in the demands of fostering that communication was not a priority and, in some families, did not exist in a meaningful way. One interviewee lamented "we didn't ever sit like as a family and discuss things". Yet open communication was heralded as the solution to many problems.

> For her to have to take place, play second fiddle to a foster child was very, very difficult, but on the other hand we talked about it afterwards. And that's why I say that line of communication between the biological children and the parents has to be very open, open, open- very sharing.

Although this population size was too small to make large generalizations, it seemed that the parents were more confident that the necessary communication was occurring than the biological children were. As noted previously, children may feel inhibited from speaking out due to their age and awareness level, the pressure to see themselves as "lucky" in relation to the foster children and/or the sense that their

feelings were of less importance.

> I felt that there were things that I couldn't really tell them. Being jealous. I mean, because I just couldn't say 'Mom, you seem to give them all the time. What about me?' I just, I mean, I didn't really...I don't know why I couldn't.

One interviewee stated that although the negative experiences associated with fostering were still a reality, this person did not wish to be honest about those feelings with the parents now because "it wouldn't change anything". Whatever the case may be, it would appear wise for parents to be sensitive to these issues in order to enhance open communication between them and their offspring.

Interviewees who felt that they could share openly with their parents also had more positive experiences with regards to fostering. Participants who felt this element lacking, indicated that their situation would have been improved with increased communication with their parents.

> Other families that are really open about their feelings and can talk about their feelings might not, their kids might not have those issues, you know? And, so I think, what I said before, making sure that you're open about your feelings and express them.

Several parents felt that by encouraging their biological children to express their feelings with their parents, they were furnished with a meaningful inclusion in the fostering experience. This was particularly important to parents who felt that their biological children might be feeling frustrated or disappointed with situations that arose because of the presence of the foster child. "You allow him [the biological child] to express himself and then we try to explain why we were doing what we are

doing."

An area of particular concern to the parents was maintaining a balance between the needs of their biological children and their foster children. Here again, communication was stated as necessary to avoid disillusionment on the part of the biological child. "I think the needs of my foster child often took precedence over my own kids. But again, I always made sure that communication [occurred]." The participating parents claimed to be aware of when their biological children were angry because they had to "play second fiddle" to the foster children who "invariably pick the right time to test you", declared one parent. Allowing the biological children the freedom to feel and express their frustrations was presented as a healthy way to deal with such situations. One parent stated,

> I think it's good for us to accept the resentment of the child, instead of trying to change it. I know this is easier said than done- but otherwise we get a very hostile child.

Overall Assessment of Fostering by the Biological Children

As one might conclude from the above reflections, fostering received a mixed review from the participants in this study. While some individuals felt that it had been an "alright" or even a "good" experience, others were adamant that fostering had negatively altered their family experience. Some stated that while they would have liked certain things to be different (i.e. family dynamics), they did not feel that they could place sole responsibility for that onto fostering.

Some of the positive aspects which interviewees related to fostering included

an increased awareness of other people's struggles and an ability to empathize. Several interviewees revealed that they liked children and that they felt rewarded helping people. Younger interviewees stated that they enjoyed having a lot of people to play with. One participant suggested that fostering has brought her and her mother closer together. "I love having foster kids because they have forced us [her mother and her] to sit at 12:00 in the morning and talk about what's going on."

Other people were less able to express positive experiences related to fostering. "Positive things? Ummm, that's a really difficult one to answer. I don't know if there were any positive things." Another respondent felt that the time and attention which foster children required from the parents created a dilemma which the entire family felt. "I just don't think it's right to do...family time was just nil". Some of the negative experiences interviewees associated with fostering included constrained freedoms, lack of spontaneity in family activities, emotional distance between family members, and feeling of a lesser concern to their parents than the foster children.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Implications

There are several implications from this study. It has been noted that information and training for foster children has often over-looked the importance of the biological children. Yet the introduction of a new person into the family creates stress for everyone.

> It is very important that the [social or case] worker convey to the family from the beginning of their contact that these children will inevitably create stress when coming into a family, and the issue is whether the family is comfortable with stress, the degree of stress they can tolerate, and what they do to deal with it (Cohen & Westhues, 1987, p. 28).

One parent stated "If a couple with kids decides they're going to foster you don't have foster parents, you have a foster family. Everyone's involved." This was a truism both for parents and children in this study. Fostering agencies need to be aware of this fact when assessing families as potential foster carers. They should also give support and training to foster families on how to deal with the stresses associated with fostering, including specific suggestions for parents on how to balance the needs of the foster children with their biological children.

Parents also need to be aware of the situation their biological children may feel placed in. Although the needs of the foster children may seem paramount, these should not override the reality which the biological children face. Secondly, parents should be cautious when assuming that their biological children understand the position of their parents, or that these children are feeling content about the situations

they experience in their family. Several interviewees have suggested that although they did not reveal their feelings when they were young, those feelings developed into anger as they grew older. Some of the participants suggested that while they felt that they were able to articulate their thoughts and feelings, they did not. The explanations given for this hesitance to speak out included feeling that their experiences were less important than those of the foster children, and feeling that they would not be taken seriously. Other interviewees implied that their ability to converse freely about their feelings increased their satisfaction regarding fostering. While open communication should be a goal of all families, fostering families need to be sensitive to the issues which may prevent such openness between members.

From this study, it was clear that a lot of demands are made on foster parents, causing them to be busy people. Yet amidst all the pressure, foster parents are advised by both interviewees and their parents to take time for their biological children as well. One parent explained that as their family incorporates everyone equally, she reveals a need to "balance [her] children and [her] foster children... each one of them is going to have to feel special." Another parent placed the emphasis on the biological children. "If you look at your own children, you've got to make them feel special. I think, personally, this is a really critical thing." Suggestions for how to make the biological children feel valued included taking time to be alone with that child (i.e. going for lunch together), explaining to them that they are loved and are just as special as anyone else, recognizing that their everyday problems are just as real to the parents as the more extreme problems which foster children may bring

with them, and being careful not to discipline the biological child more harshly because of the presence of the foster children.

Although several participants in this study felt the necessity to articulate the "best" diagram of family perspectives, there did not seem to be a clear preference on which arrangement was most appropriate, as long as certain elements were also present. Some of these elements including the age of the children and the amount of communication between members, are discussed below. However, perception of familial relationships was an important issue if there was not a clear understanding between the biological child and the parents as to which diagram depicted their situation. Particularly if the biological child sensed pressure to consider the family other than she/he felt capable of. Therefore, the biological children felt at odds with their parents if they perceived and/or desired their family to be arranged with a solid nucleus, but felt that their parents expected them to conceptualize the family as an open boundary system. Different interviewees professed that they felt comfortable in any one of the three situations, depending on the relationship and understanding they had with their parents as well as with the foster children.

Concluding from the parents' discussions, families can be regarded in more than one way at one time. Although the parents were concerned about their biological children, they often assumed that these children would see their families in a certain manner (i.e. solid nucleus) even though the parents tried to act in another (i.e. open boundary). As this ambiguity can cause distress, this is an important issue to be aware of. While the constructs articulated here are preliminary, they act as a

sensitizing concept to allow families and agencies to begin a dialogue regarding family perceptions which include the voices of the biological children. As the biological children are often ignored in many of the processes around fostering, it is important for employees of the fostering agency to allow for a meaningful participation of these individuals. This may be done through inviting and including the biological children in some of the meetings which previously only consisted of the parents' input. One parent revealed that when her biological daughter accompanied her to a meeting with the social workers, the workers were surprised. This parent stated, "it was like no one's ever done this before?" The inclusion of the biological children needs to be a priority for fostering agencies.

While a clear consensus regarding familial structures was not reached, some families described feeling pressure from their respective agency to conceptualize their family in a manner different from their personal preference. When assessing families who indicate an interest in fostering, social workers may rate a family higher if they indicate a structure resembling an open boundary. However, from this study, that particular perception may not be the most appropriate one. Participants indicated the importance of other factors including the ability to participate in decision-making, pressures to be good, and open communication as more indicative of whether or not a family demonstrated healthy functioning. There was also an implied desire for families who preferred an arrangement other than the open boundary model to be supported in this preference. By pressuring a family, agency personnel may be doing a disservice both to the parents, the biological children, as well as the foster children

as it is presumed that a healthy family is the best alternative for children at risk.

Further Study

As the purpose of this research was to explore some of the experiences which foster families face, it is certainly not conclusive. Some preliminary suggestions are mentioned above, but they are not definitive in their scope. A limitation of this study is that it remains unclear whether one model is more helpful in meeting the needs for all concerned. Further study is necessary to determine in more depth the implications of the varying family constructs both on the family as a whole, but also on the individual members including the biological and foster children. Although the interviewees indicated some consequences of the varying perceptions, the actual depictions were constructed after the qualitative interviews and presented to the focus groups (which parents attended) for reflection. It would be beneficial to incorporate the reactions of the biological children in these discussions in order to understand more fully what kind of family dynamics are most helpful with regard to different perceptions. The perception of how foster children view themselves in relation to the family organization and the interaction between biological and foster siblings also need to be investigated in order to better understand the impact of specific dynamics such as age and gender.

As this study was designed as an exploratory effort to understanding the experiences of fostering upon the biological children, a comparison group was not utilized. It therefore remains uncertain as to what extent the feelings expressed in this

research are unique from children who grew up without foster siblings. Further research to determine the distinctiveness of these responses would be helpful in assessing the impact of fostering upon the biological children of foster parents. However, it is important to value the experiences of the biological children without attempting to compare them to other children. It is the perception of injustice or the feeling that their family was not "normal" which led to the negative responses of several interviewees. These should not be dismissed simply because 'other children' have negative feelings about their 'normal' families. Further research should be careful not to minimize the personal experiences of the biological children in foster families, while it seeks to identify elements which are distinct from, or common with, families who do not choose to foster.

A few unique experiences also influenced the responses of several participants. One family who had survived a previous traumatic and abusive situation felt that they were able to relate to the foster children and suggested that they therefore had an easier time incorporating the foster children into their concept of "family" (as an open boundary system). A multi-named family (even biologically-related members had different names) felt that it was easier to include another "name" into their family than other families would.

Home-schooling was another situation which influenced the attitudes of the respondent toward fostering. The biological children who studied at home while the foster children went to public school did not reveal feelings of frustration at being 'left out' or ignored, because they felt they had enough of their mother's time during

the day, contributing to their feelings of being special and valued members of the family. This experience allowed the parents to give their own children attention and yet still spend a considerable amount of time and attention with the foster children. Further exploration of these rather unique situations may also help to delineate how to assist families to foster.

Finally, to reiterate a point made many times, this topic is important to study further because it is an important issue for families. Cohen and Westhues debunk a popular myth that parenting is a natural and simple task which humans become involved in. "We know that to parent a child is probably one of the most difficult and complex tasks any adult can undertake" (1987, p. 14). Fostering a child who brings with her many different experiences and often values can make this task even more challenging. Yet many foster parents declared that they did not receive much assistance in the tasks they undertook. One parent claimed, "All I had to go on was common sense and what my parents taught me". Although both of these are valuable tools for parenting, fostering presents its own unique situations which may not be as adequately understood through personal experience or common sense. As one participant observed, this aspect of fostering affects the parents, the family, the foster children and the fostering agencies: "As soon as you start sacrificing your own family you've gone too far. Which is in fact what will ruin your job". Alternatives for how to strengthen and support *the entire family* are necessary to increase the effectiveness of fostering and the well-being of the families involved.

Appendix A

Letter to Referring Agencies

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Waterloo, ON
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Tel: (519) 884-6322

Mutual Support
P.O. Box 397
792 Canboro Rd.
Fenwick, Ontario
L0S 1C0

or: Waterloo FACS
200 Ardelt Ave.
Kitchener, Ontario

Re: Research Project on the effects of fostering on the biological children of foster parents

Date:

Dear _____ (respective agency members),

As you may remember, I have been investigating foster families with a particular interest in the impact fostering has on the biological children of parents who decide to foster. When we last spoke, I was looking for literature on this topic and found that while there was a general interest in this area, there was a lack of substantive information.

I am therefore undertaking the thesis option of the Masters' of Social Work Program at Wilfrid Laurier University and addressing this lack of research. I will be conducting interviews with the biological children of parents who foster, both with children whose family currently fosters, and those who have grown up as their parents fostered children. I will also be presenting a preliminary analysis of the data to the parents in a focus group setting.

It is my hope that you will be able to assist me in finding families who would be willing to participate in this study. I am also contacting ___(other agency)__ . I am anticipating interviews with children (ages 5-17) from three families who are currently fostering and have fostered for at least one year previously, as well as three people (over 18) who have experienced at least one year as a child growing up with foster-siblings. I would hope to include all of the parents in focus groups to reflect

on the findings.

I plan to set up "acquaintance meetings" with the families who demonstrate an interest in participating before engaging them in the study. This would allow for the children to meet me before deciding if they would feel comfortable participating. This is to allow the children the freedom to decide rather than feeling compelled to meet with a complete "stranger". I would follow-up with a phone call to determine whether each family would be willing participants. Both parents and children in families who agree to participate will be asked to sign an informed consent form. All information will be kept confidential, unless it becomes apparent that the child is at risk of hurting himself/herself or anyone else; or if the child reveals stories of abuse. If this should happen, the proper authorities will be contacted. All names and identifying data will be omitted from the findings.

The interviews will consist of a set of guideline questions, but will be largely informal. It is my hope to use these questions as a starting point to explore the experiences of the participants.

It would be my pleasure to discuss this research project in more detail with you.

Yours sincerely,

Judy Heidbuurt

Appendix B

Family Information Sheet

To be filled in by the interviewer:

Family Name_____

Parent Names_____

Parental Occupation(s)_____

Address:_____

_____

_____

Phone: _____

number of biological children_____

names:_____ age:_____sex:___

_____ age:_____sex:___

_____ age:_____sex:___

_____ age:_____sex:___

_____ age:_____sex:___

number of current foster children_____

name :_____ age:_____sex:___

Length of time with this family_____

name :_____ age:_____sex:___

Length of time with this family_____

(* by participants' names)

Appendix C

Letter of Informed Consent

Judy Heidbuurt
54 Laurel St.
Waterloo, ON
N2J 2H2

Tel: (519) 884-6322

To the participating families,

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself and the research project which I am asking you to participate in. I am a graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo and am undertaking this project under the supervision of Dr. Eli Teram. My Master's thesis focuses on the impact of fostering on the biological children of parents who foster.

You can be sure that all the information collected will be kept strictly confidential. Whenever I use the material I collect from you, I will not use your name, names of those close to you or any other identifying information.

I am asking each family who participates to allow me to interview the biological children individually. The interviews will be largely unstructured, but will focus on the experiences of the respondents. The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. Parents will be invited to reflect on the data collected during focus groups (i.e. with other parents). *The specific responses from your child will be kept confidential*, however, parents will have an opportunity to view a summary of all the aggregate data collected, during the focus groups.

If you would like to talk further to someone about your experiences, your social worker (for FACS, or case worker at Mutual Support Systems) would be happy to talk with you.

I would like to stress that your participation is voluntary. While I hope it would be an enjoyable learning experience for you and your family, you may withdraw from the study at any time. You may refuse to answer any questions and you will receive a copy of the final report, if you like. In fact, I would appreciate your comments. The information collected in this study may be also be used in presentations, conferences, and publication.

For further information or comments, please contact me at the above address.

_____have read the above statement and agree to participate in this study under the conditions discussed above.

_____ _____

Signature of Parents/ or child over the age of 16. Date

Appendix D

Letter of Informed Consent- for KIDS

Hi! My name is Judy and I'm working on a big project to help people understand what it's like to live in a family with foster brothers and sisters. I would appreciate your help. I am hoping to talk with up to ten different families about how they live with foster children.

If you participate in this project, I will be asking you some questions about what you think. I will not tell anyone else what you said. I will be using some of the things that you tell me in this project so other people can understand how you feel, but I will never tell them who said it.

You don't have to answer any questions if you don't want to. You also don't have to participate in this project at all. And any time you feel like you want to quit, you can.

If you would like to talk to someone else afterwards about how you feel, you can talk to your parents or to a social (or case) worker. Just let me or your parents know.

If you feel O.K. about these things, you can sign your

name on this
line:_____

and put the date on this
line:_____

Parent signature_____

date:_____

Appendix E

Interview Guide for Children at Home

(To be adapted depending on the age and maturity of each child.)

1. Introduce self

2. I want to begin by asking some questions about you. What grade are you in? Do you enjoy school? Why/why not.

3. What sort of things do you like to do? (i.e. hobbies/ games) Are you involved in anything outside of your house (i.e. music lessons, karate lessons, sports)? What things do you like to do with other people, and what do you like to do alone?

4. I understand [name of foster child(ren)] is/are your foster brother(s)/sister(s). What's it like being in a family with foster siblings? How do the foster children treat you? How do you treat them? Do you like having them around?

5. Was there a time that you remember when it was just you (and your biological brothers and sisters)? What was that like? Do you think it's different than now? What is different?

6. What was it like when your family first started to foster other children? What was that like? Did you like having a foster brother/sister around? Did anything change?

7. What's it like right now for you? Do you think it's a good thing your family fosters children? Why/why not?

8. What do other children think of your family? What do you tell them? What do they say?

9. Who do you think of when you think of your family? Who do you consider to be in your family?

10. How do your parents respond to all of the children? Do you feel special or different from the foster children? If so, how?

11. Do your foster brothers and sisters ever talk about their "other" mom/dad or their "real" mom/dad? How does that make you feel?

12. Do your parents ever spend time with just you? What do you do? or Would you like them to do? What would you like to do?

13. How do your parents treat you compared to your foster siblings? Do you think they treat you differently, or the same?

14. (if not discussed before) Do you find a lot of new people coming to your house (social workers etc.)? How does that make you feel?

15. If you could have a choice between keeping everything the same or changing anything you wanted to, what would you do? How/Why?

16. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

Thank you for talking with me today. I will not tell anyone what you said, but if you would like to tell your parents what we talked about that would be fine. If there is anything that you want to know from me, or would like to tell me, ask your parents to give me a call.

Appendix F
Interview Guide -for Adult Children

1. Introduce Self

2. Invite the participant to tell a bit about themselves (what they do, hobbies, interests)

3. How many foster children did your parents foster? How frequent was it for there to be foster children in your family? How long did they stay?

4. When you think of your family (growing up) who do you think of? Who do you include in your concept of "family"? Did it change for you as you grew up?

5. Do you think having foster brothers and sisters had an impact on you? How, or in what way? What was it like to grow up with foster siblings?

6. Were you included in any of the decision-making regarding your parents' choice to foster? Do you think you should have been more/less involved?

7. Do you remember when your family first started to foster children? How did you experience/adapt to that change in your family life?

8. Did you feel special or different from the foster children in your family? Why/ why not? How?

9. Did you feel that your parents had time for you? Were there any differences in the way your parents treated you from how they responded to the foster children?

10. What are some of the positives for you because of growing up in a family that fostered? Negatives?

11. Is there anything you would have liked to change?

12. What suggestions would you give to families who are considering whether or not they should foster? For families who are fostering right now?

13. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Thank you for your time. I would like to remind you that your name will be withheld whenever this data is discussed. I copy of the transcript is also available for you, if you wish. Please feel free to contact me with your comments or if there is anything you would like to add.

Appendix G

Ethical Considerations

Although in-depth interviewing about familial experiences may not place most participants at risk, provisions have been set should the interviewees experience emotional difficulties due to this study. While no participant will be forced to share more than he or she feels ready to discuss, inviting open discussion about one's family and their experiences may cause some people to feel discomfort. Supportive staff at Mutual Support have been identified who will make themselves available to any participants who feel the need to discuss their feelings afterwards. Rona Cameron from Family and Children's Services has also made herself available to speak with for the families associated with that organization.

All participants and their parents will be asked to sign a consent form. (Children under the age of eighteen will co-sign with their parents, parents of adult children will sign a form specifically for the focus groups.) Should participants reveal serious situations which require professional intervention, appropriate measures will be taken.

Confidentiality of all files will be strictly maintained. Files will be accessible only to the researcher, and audiotapes will be labelled with a code number corresponding to each participant. The list of codes and names will be filed securely.

Finally, this research will be subject to the formal ethical review process at Wilfrid Laurier University.

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